



COLOURED STONES

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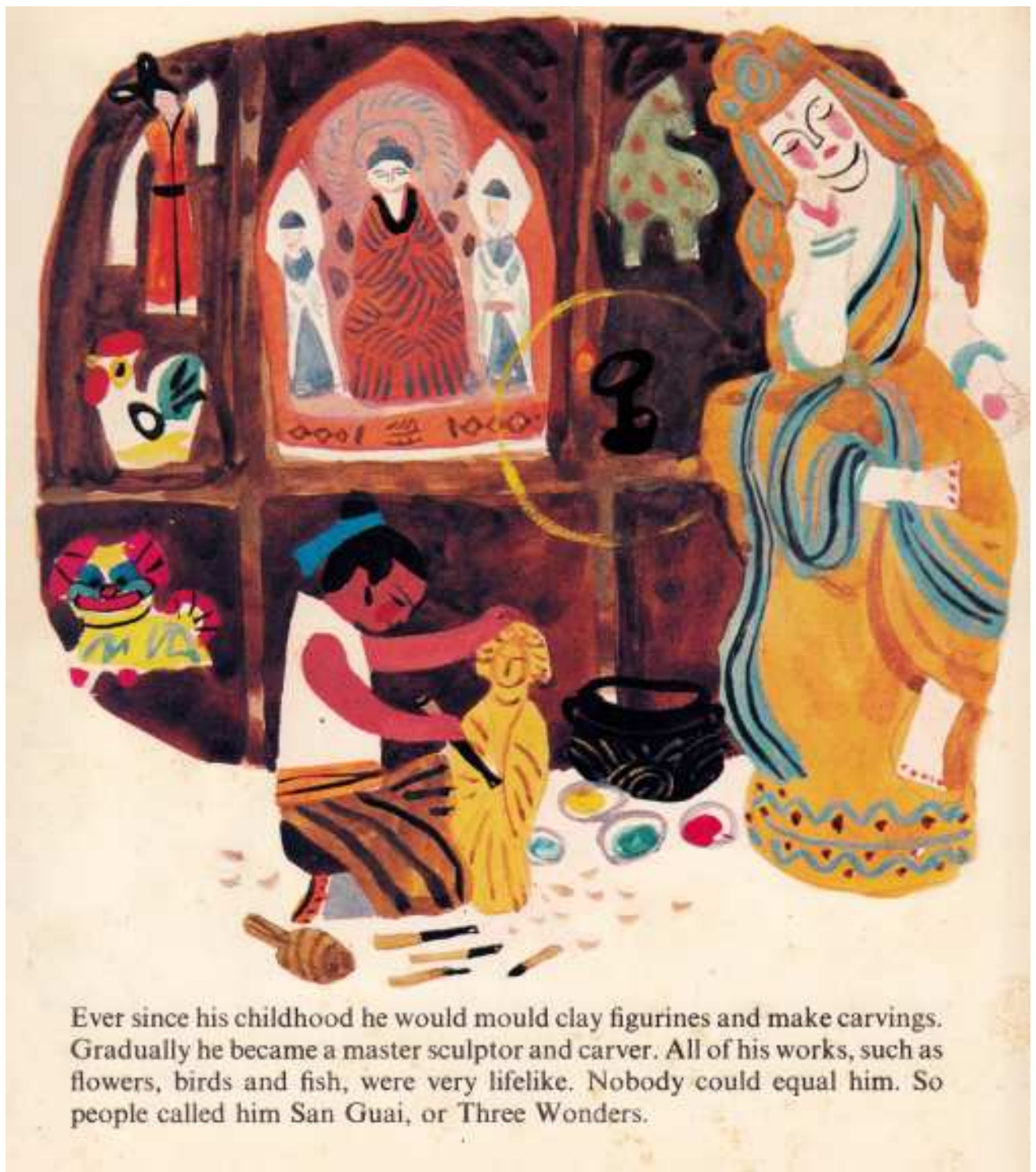
Coloured Stones



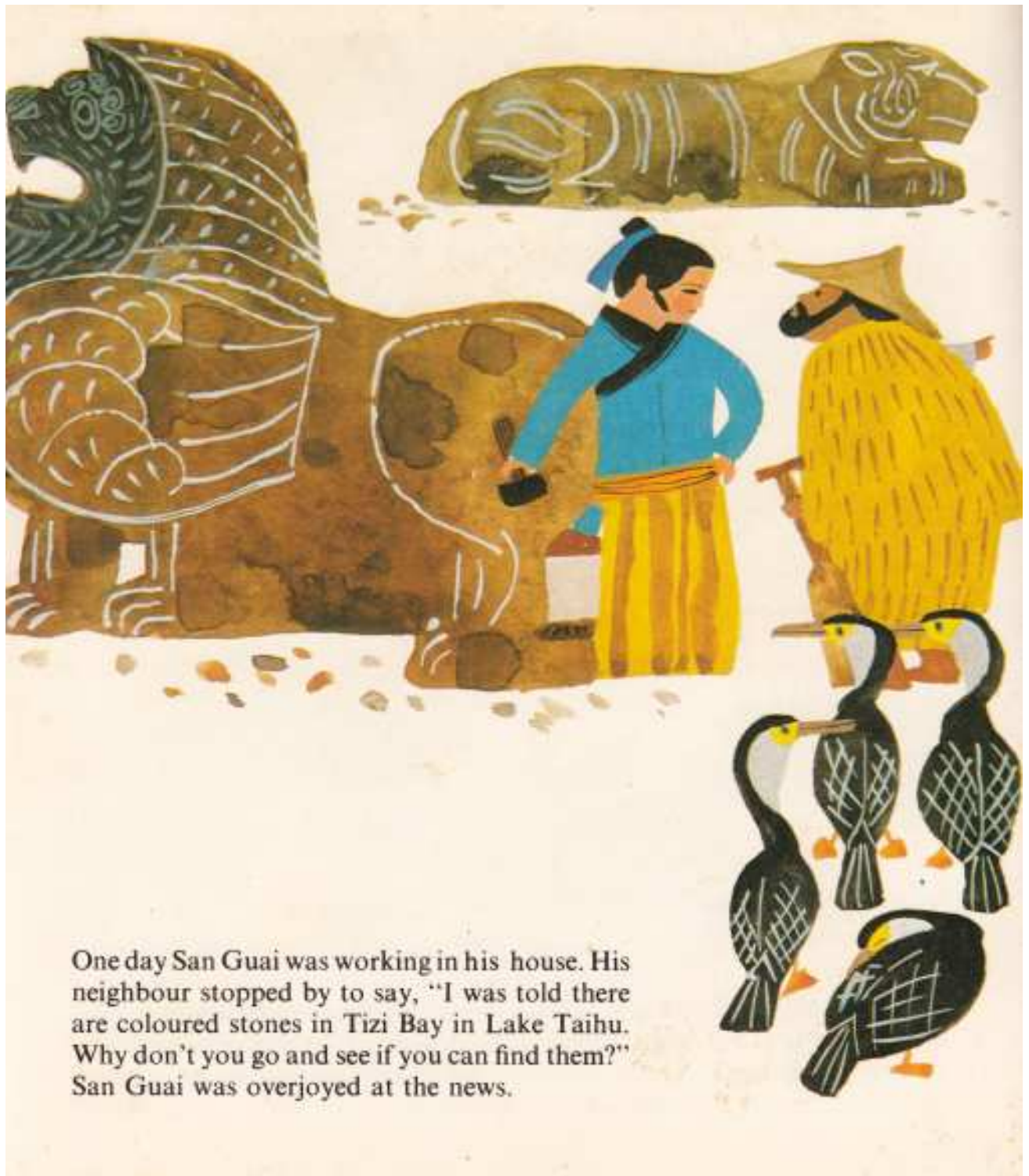
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Long, long ago a young man lived in a tile-roofed house that was in a very bad condition. He was extremely diligent and did all kinds of work. Because he was pleasant and helpful, people treated him as one of their own family members.



Ever since his childhood he would mould clay figurines and make carvings. Gradually he became a master sculptor and carver. All of his works, such as flowers, birds and fish, were very lifelike. Nobody could equal him. So people called him San Guai, or Three Wonders.



One day San Guai was working in his house. His neighbour stopped by to say, "I was told there are coloured stones in Tizi Bay in Lake Taihu. Why don't you go and see if you can find them?" San Guai was overjoyed at the news.



Before dawn the following day, he carried his chisels, burins and a hammer, and took a boat out on the lake. He had made up his mind to find the coloured stones and make something absolutely marvellous out of them.



He arrived at Tizi Bay and started looking for them. He tried every hill, cliff, valley and beach.

After a few days he had eaten all his food, but still no coloured stones had been found. Disheartened, San Guai sat on a huge rock and sighed.



Suddenly, a noise from the lake caught his attention. A white-bearded old man rose above the water. He had a stick in his hand to support himself.



"Hey, what can I do for you?" the old man asked with a smile. San Guai bowed deeply with great respect and said, "Grandpa, I have come for the coloured stones. But they are nowhere to be found."

The old man hobbled over to him. He twirled his stick, and it turned into a snow-white robe. "Young man, I've got plenty of coloured stones at my place. Why don't you put on this robe and follow me home to fetch them? You could also help me with some work."





San Guai put on the white robe, closed his eyes and followed the old man into the lake. He felt cold water all around him. When he opened his eyes he couldn't see the old man, only a large, white fish swimming by his side! And he himself had become a fish too! San Guai was so frightened that he cried. But no sound came out of his open mouth.



They bypassed a pagoda-topped hill and swam through a stone cave. Then they arrived at a beautiful crystal palace. With a jerk of its body, the big, white fish turned into the old man again. He removed the robe from San Guai, who discovered that he was back to normal too, and still had all his tools tied to his waist.

"Here we are!" the old man smiled. "Please come in and meet our Dragon King."



In the crystal hall sat the Dragon King, flanked by his tortoise prime minister, his turtle marshal and his crab generals. He was discussing ways of beautifying his palace with them. "The crystal palace has been built," Dragon King said. "But it needs a lot of carving and decoration to make it more beautiful."

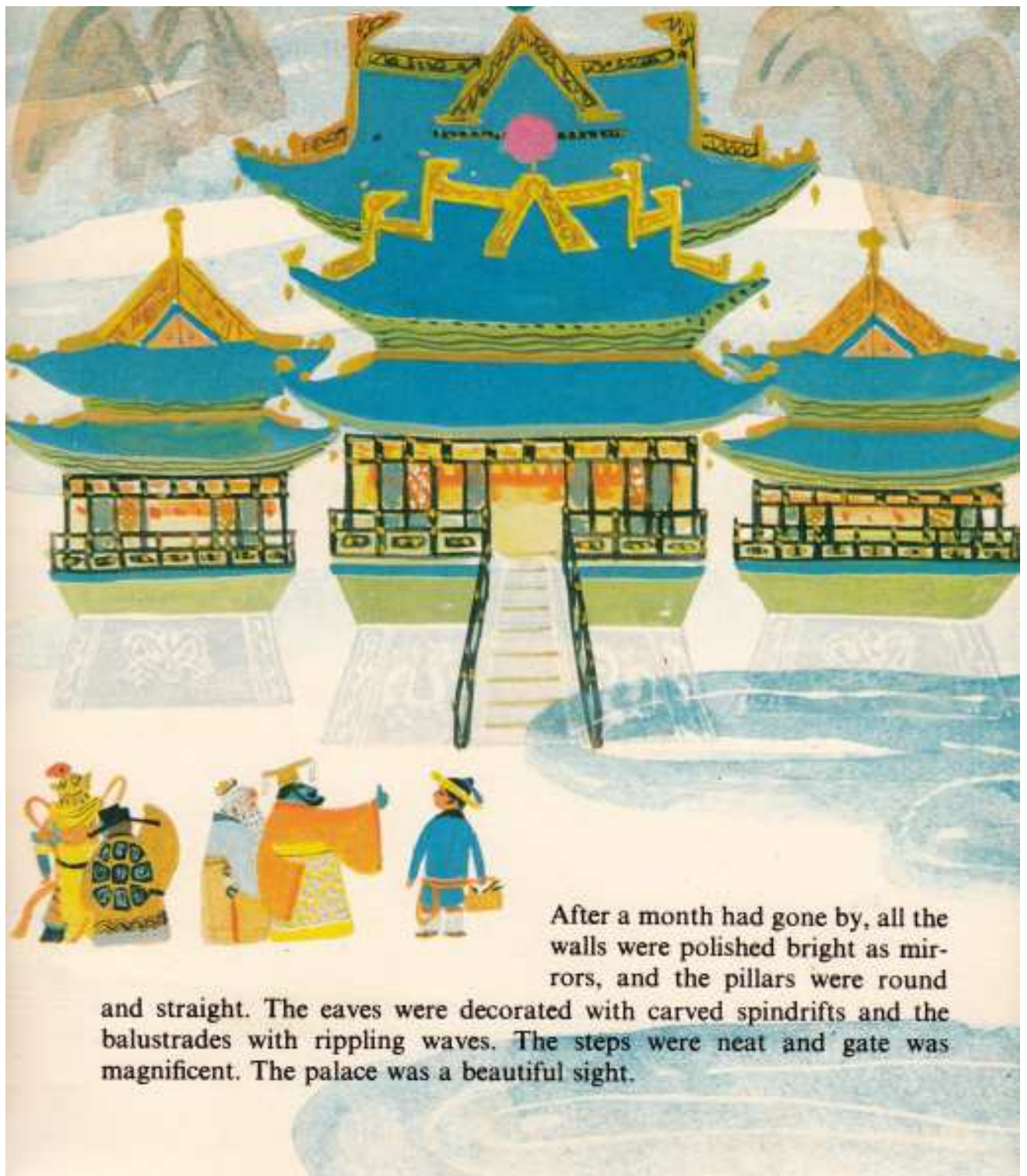
He stopped as he saw his old butler coming in with a young man.



When the aquatic officials saw the stranger, they rubbed their faces and turned into human beings. The Dragon King turned his head and said unhappily to the butler, "Who on earth is this youngster?" "Your Excellency, this is the famous carver San Guai! I asked him to help with decorating your crystal palace," the old man answered.

The old butler gave San Guai a team of aquatic soldiers to serve as helpers and San Guai showed them what to do.

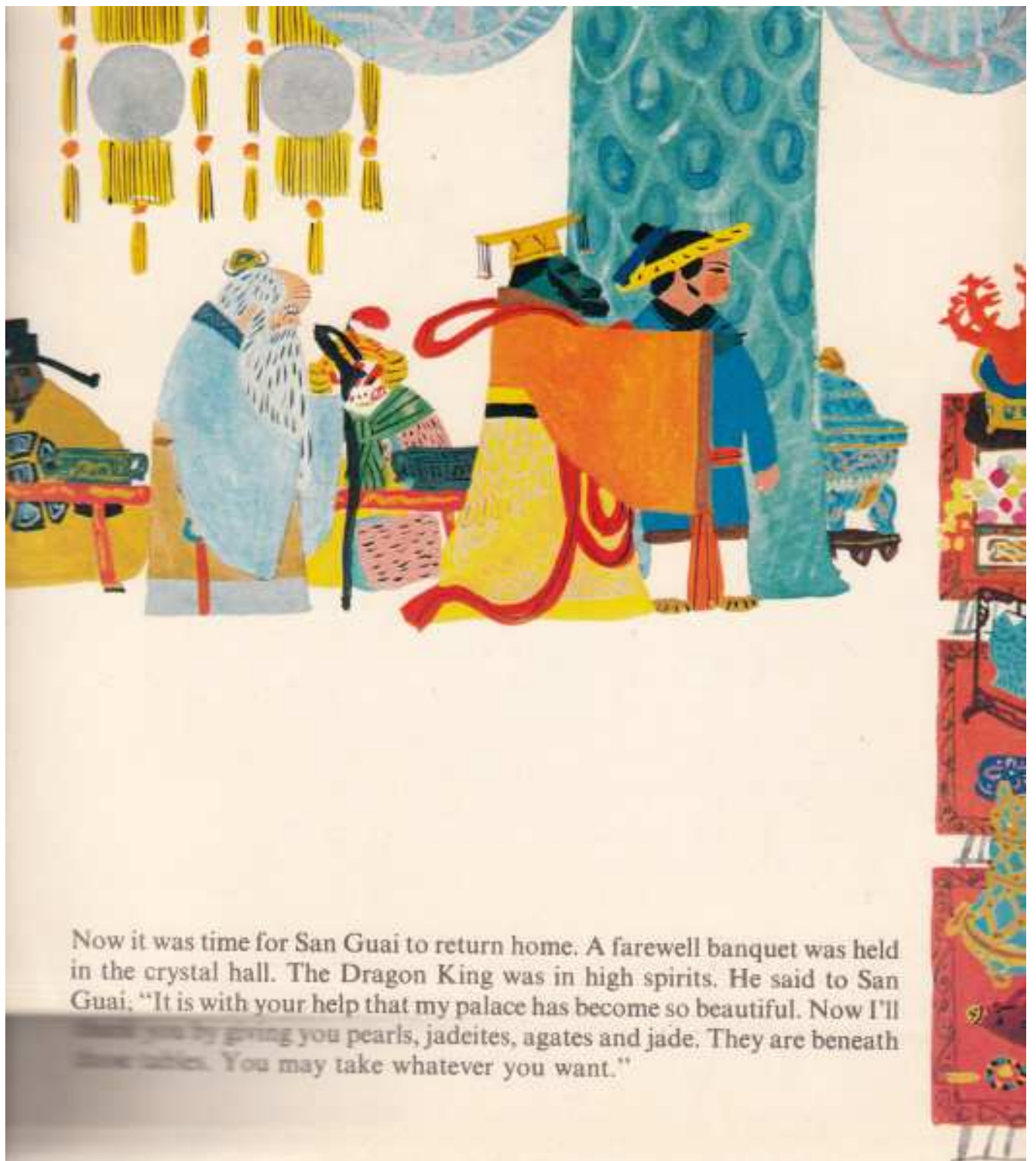




After a month had gone by, all the walls were polished bright as mirrors, and the pillars were round and straight. The eaves were decorated with carved spindrifts and the balustrades with rippling waves. The steps were neat and gate was magnificent. The palace was a beautiful sight.



San Guai also made a treasure-decorated cart with flying wheels for the elderly butler. Sitting in the cart, the glad and grateful old man said, "What a kind person you are!"



Now it was time for San Guai to return home. A farewell banquet was held in the crystal hall. The Dragon King was in high spirits. He said to San Guai, "It is with your help that my palace has become so beautiful. Now I'll thank you by giving you pearls, jadeites, agates and jade. They are beneath these tables. You may take whatever you want."

San Guai walked around the tables. With the help of the old man, he found several pieces of coloured stones under one of the tables. "They are coloured stones!" San Guai was very excited.





When San Guai got back home after his long absence, his villagers told him how much they had worried about him and missed him. San Guai told them of his adventure, and showed them the coloured stones.

San Guai went on leading a poor life. Whenever he had time he worked on the stones. He planned to create some thing to show the Lake Taihu people's aspiration for a better future.





After a long time had passed, he finished a Spring Silkworm nibbling at an emerald mulberry leaf, and a graceful Lotus. Just as he was about to finish a silvery fish from another piece of stone, a misfortune befell him.

It was summer. The emperor was bored with his palace life. So he went to rest by Lake Taihu together with his concubines, maids, officers and officials.





The emperor ordered people to send him live fish and crabs. These were prepared differently every day. He ate to his heart's content in his palace resort, with maids dancing to entertain him.



One day, the emperor, dressed up as an ordinary person, took a stroll. He saw a crowd of excited people swarming forward saying, "Come on! San Guai has carved some marvellous treasures. Let's go and have a look!"

The emperor followed the crowd to San Guai's house. There he saw three shining pieces of carved stones on a table. They made the greedy emperor's mouth water. He would have grabbed them if there were not so many people there. "I must have them!" he told himself.





The emperor returned to his temporary palace. He summoned all his confidants and advisors. "I plan to have that pauper killed in order to get those treasures," he said.

"I think the best way is to give him an official post. That way, you can take the treasures and have him work on some new ones for you," one of the advisors said.

The emperor accepted the idea. "Go and ask him to bring the treasures here tomorrow," he said.



The following day, the advisor came to San Guai's house and read a decree from the emperor. San Guai saw through the plot at once. "You go ahead. I'll follow on later," he said to him.



At night, San Guai dug a hole in the woods behind his house. He caressed the Spring Silkworm and said with emotion, "Oh, great earth, you are the mother of all things. I present this treasure to you." He put it into the hole and covered it with clay.



Early the next morning, San Guai went to a pond in front of his house. He put his hands into the cold, clear water and sank the Lotus into it. "Oh, pond, you're a friend of ours. I present this treasure to you."



When the sun was warming lake shores with its rays, San Guai reached the lake. "Lake Taihu, we drink your water and catch your fish. I present this carved fish to you." He bent over to drink the sweet water and put the Silvery Fish in.



The emperor was drinking and amusing himself in his palace while waiting for San Guai to arrive with the treasures. Two hours went by, and he became so anxious that he could not wait any longer. "Go and get San Guai and those treasures right away!" he bellowed at an advisor.



The advisor went with some soldiers to San Guai's house, but couldn't find him or the treasures. They destroyed the house. As they were about to start searching for him, they saw San Guai walking slowly toward them. The soldiers tied him up.

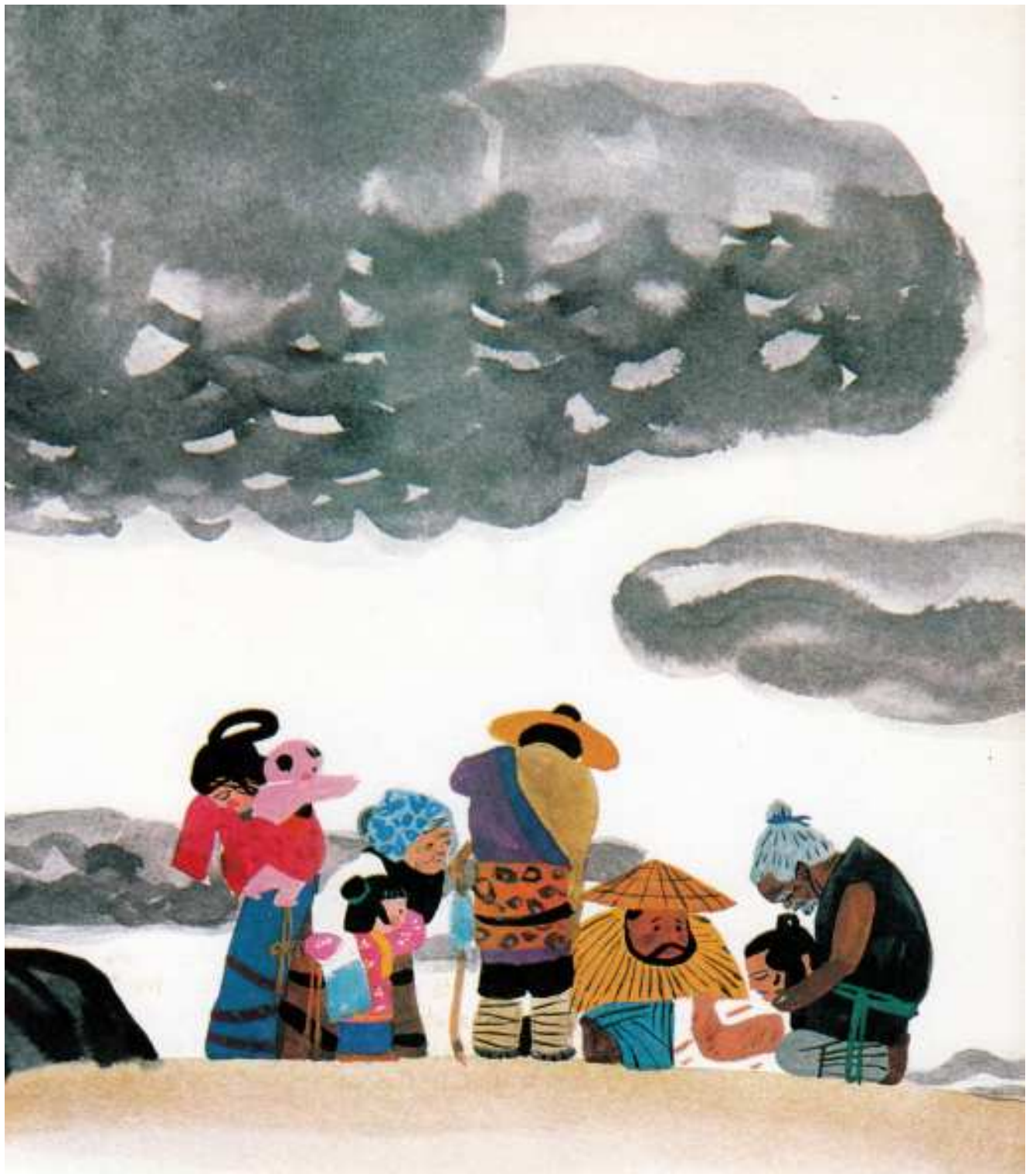
San Guai was brought to the temporary palace. The angry emperor forced him to hand over the treasures. San Guai then took them to the woods, but all the trees kept silent; he also took them to the pond, but the water was very deep. Finally he took them to the lake. A dark billowing wave rose from the lake. This frightened the emperor and made him back up several steps.





The emperor's hopes had been dashed. He flew into a rage and ordered San Guai killed. San Guai was beaten by the shore, and was just about to die.

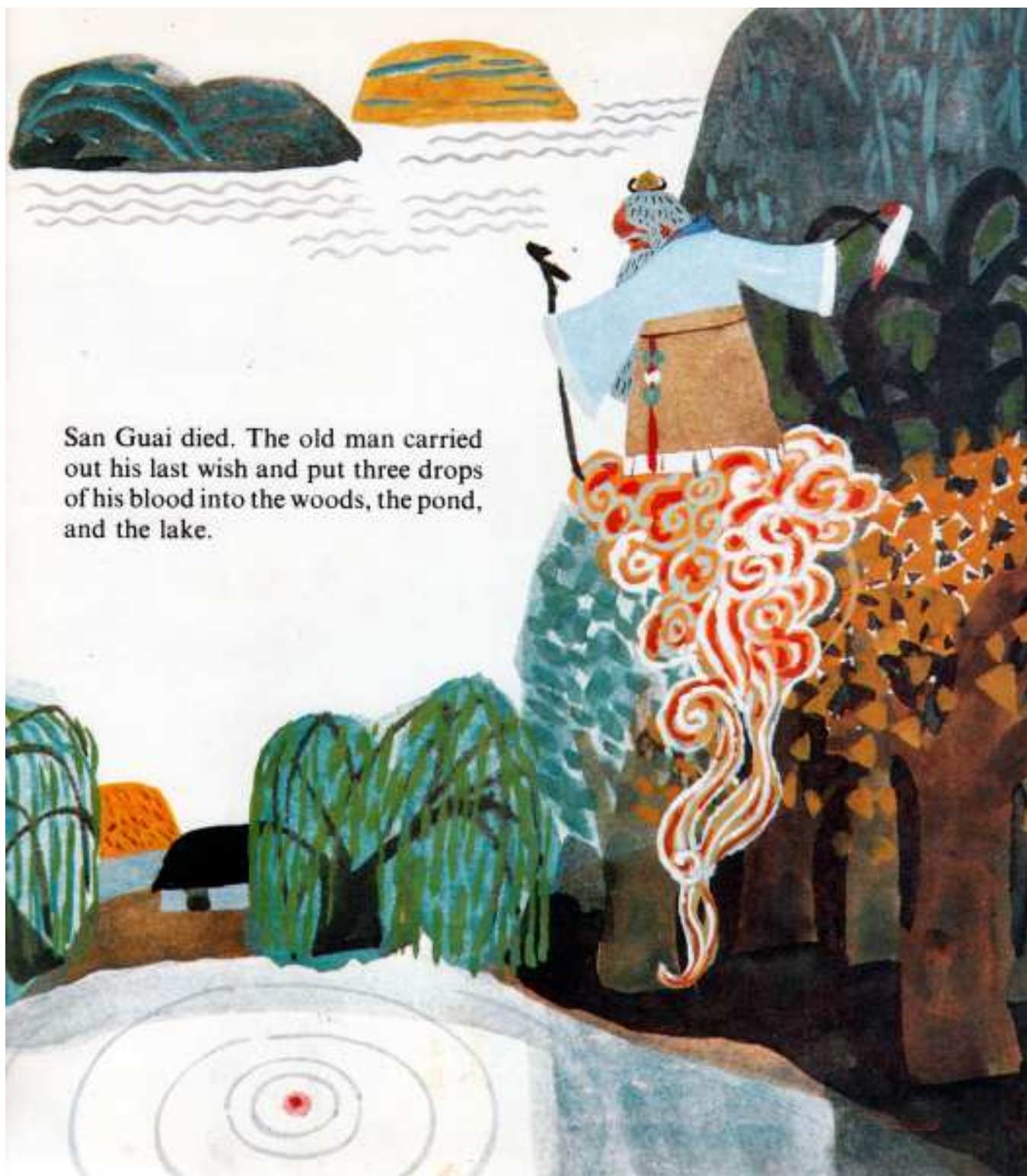
When the emperor and his men left, people rushed up and surrounded San Guai. They called his name and sobbed loudly. So sad and touching was the scene that fish, shrimps and crabs rose above the lake water to join in the wailing.





Just then, San Guai heard a faint, familiar voice — the voice of the old man from the Dragon Palace. With great effort, San Guai said, “Grandpa, I . . . I can never visit you at the palace. I just wish my people could lead a better life. I beg you to do me a favour.” In tears, the old man nodded his head.

San Guai died. The old man carried out his last wish and put three drops of his blood into the woods, the pond, and the lake.



From then on, mulberry trees appeared by the shores of Lake Taihu to feed the silkworms, lotuses with fat seedpods appeared in the ponds, and silvery fish were abundant in Lake Taihu.

For generations, people in the lake area have been proud of their affluence. But they have never forgotten San Guai, who brought them happiness at the cost of his own life.





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